Research and Policy

Narrative and Multimodality in English Language Arts Curricula: A Tale of Two Nations

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In this policy column, we focus on print and multimodal narrative, observing congruities and divergences between the role of narrative in English language arts curriculum policies in the elementary years in the US and Australia. Multimodality is defined here as the semiotic meanings that can be made from the interrelationship of two or more modes (Mills, 2011b). Modes are sign systems that describe socially and culturally shaped semiotic resources for making meaning, be they writing, drawing, music, or drama (Mills, 2011a).

Multimodality matters in the language arts curriculum because texts are not composed exclusively of words. The ubiquity of digital narrative formats and their circulation across modes and media in twenty-first century learning contexts is undeniable. For example, electronic books offer alternative narrative representations to students as a complementary practice to adult-led book reading in schools and homes (DeJong & Bus, 2004). We examine curriculum policy about the extent to which the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) and the national Australian Curriculum English (ACARA; Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority, 2014) acknowledge metalanguages of visual elements in the narrative genre. This is relevant to current research of meanings in picturebooks, films, and video games, and speaks to how visual and word meanings interrelate in these multimodal texts (Martin & White, 2005; Painter, Martin, & Unsworth, 2013).

Why Narrative?

Narrative plays a pivotal role in the socialization of learners to the literacy practices sanctioned in mainstream education throughout the Western world (Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994). While often told, heard, read, viewed (e.g., film), played (e.g., video games), or written for pleasure, narrative conveys either implicit or explicit ideological messages about myriad ways of being, becoming, and belonging (Stephens, 1992). In addition to these elements, early experiences with written and visual narrative make a particularly salient contribution to reading readiness repertoires that assist students in becoming successful readers of print and viewers of visual text (Painter, Martin, & Unsworth, 2013) as well as informing the interaction between the two (Sipe, 2000). Research over the last quarter of a century demonstrates that in many homes and communities, the authority of oral storytelling, narrative books, and book-related activities in the lives of young learners is significant (Heath, 1982; Torr & Clugston, 1999).

Narrative has long been considered to belong among "genres of power," that is, it is a highly prized and privileged genre in mainstream school settings (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). Narrative is primarily produced to entertain an audience, but may also play important roles in communicating morals, conserving culture, or communicating a point of view through oral, visual, written, or enacted stories (Exley, 2010). For example, in American literature, Puritan ideals are embedded in the children's literature of the late 1600s, and after the American Civil War, there was a "subtle but growing

shift from telling the moral truth to telling a story" (Enciso, Wolf, Coats, & Jenkins, 2010, p. 254). Thus, authors' purposes ideologically frame narrative within particular historical and cultural contexts (Hollingdale, 1995), and if commercially published, also reflect marketplace goals (Sekeres, 2009).

Narrative is typically constituted by a story that contains an orientation—information about the characters and setting; complications—events that constitute a problem; and a resolution—how the problems were solved (Droga & Humphrey, 2003). A coda—an evaluative comment, or a reorientation, is sometimes included in narrative. For example, Jeannie Baker's *Mirror* (2010) is a wordless picturebook that commences with two simultaneous orientations across different geographical and cultural spaces, two simultaneous sets of complications, and two simultaneous resolutions. While there are discernable structures of conventional narrative texts across different modes of delivery, there are also many hybrid variations, such as nonlinear, postmodern picturebooks.

Here, we critique the extent to which educational policies in the Common Core State Standards for the English language arts and the national Australian Curriculum English engage with the multimodality of narrative, particularly given the "digital turn" that has been influencing literacy studies for some decades now (Mills, 2010). We focus here on Kindergarten to Grade 10 in the CCSS in order to make comparisons with the Australian Curriculum English (ACARA, 2014), which excludes the senior levels of schooling (years 11 and 12).

Common Core State Standards: Narrative and Multimodality

The term "narrative" appears 26 times across the Reading and Writing strands of the CCSS (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). In this section, we discuss the role of narrative in the Writing and Reading Standards, respectively, to follow the organization of the curriculum. (Individual Standards are referred to by CCSS number; see them at http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy.)

Writing (Including Narrative)

In the Writing strand, beginning upon entry to school, students begin to "use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to narrate a single event or several loosely linked events" in chronological order, and respond personally to narrative events (CCSS.ELA–Literacy.W.K.3; hereafter referred to only by suffix, e.g., W.K.3). The acknowledgment of the role of drawing in early writing is consistent with early childhood research that explains how learners combine multimodal meaning-making systems, such as talking, role playing, singing, and drawing, prior to using written linguistic systems (Siegel, 2006). Early concepts of narrative are extended in middle primary, where Grade 4 students write more complex and lengthy narratives that demonstrate "effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences" (W.4). This includes constructing written narratives that orient the reader and sequence events that "unfold naturally" (4.3.a).

A key omission from the CCSS for the English language arts is the term "multimodal." This is seemingly at odds with the prominence of multimodality in literacy research and the multimodality of everyday literacy practices in a digital age.

By grades 9–10, students should construct narrative at an advanced level, attending to ". . . narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters" (9–10.3b). Furthermore, students at this level should make semiotic choices when writing that draw on "precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture . . ." of the narrative elements (9–10.3d).

A key omission from the CCSS for the English language arts is the term "multimodal." This is seemingly at odds with the prominence of multimodality in literacy research and the multimodality of everyday literacy practices in a digital age (Mills, 2009). For example, teachers should use a variety of narrative texts in the classroom, such as

"nursery rhymes" and "drama," including staged dialogue and brief familiar scenes (see Standard 10—Range, Quality, and Complexity of Text Types for Kindergarten to Grade 5). Interpreting or creating the multiple modes of meaning making inherent in these texts—such as music and finger plays in nursery rhymes, or the use of voice, gestures, costumes, and props in drama—is not the focus of instruction, nor are they to be made explicit. There is no recognition that visual, audio, spatial, and gestural meanings are used to support, juxtapose, and/or sometimes even to deliberately contradict the linguistic meanings in the production and interpretation of drama (e.g., excessively melodramatic music in a parody).

While there is mention of the use of digital technologies for text production in the CCSS, the modified grammars of digital texts (including digital narrative) are not elaborated.

While there is scope for teachers to support learners' narrative knowledge within the CCSS, there is no clear development of a "multimodal metalanguage"—a language for talking about sign systems—beyond linguistic or written elements (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Some examples of gaps in the curriculum are as follows:

- How do narrative meanings of words work in combination with meanings represented in other modes, such as the images in picturebooks?
- How do gestural design elements and spatial layouts enhance the word meanings of narrative poetry?
- How are the semiotic resources of speech, gestures, movements, lighting, costumes, props, and music orchestrated together to create more powerful meanings than the words alone in dramatic performances and film?

For several decades, there has been a substantial body of research into children's narrative composing processes demonstrating the relevance of incorporating multimedia and attending to the nonlinguistic features of narrative (Mills, 2010). These have included studies of narrative in children's video interaction and film production (Adami, 2009; Ranker & Mills, 2014), the semiotic potentials of combined modes in digital storytelling (Hull & Nelson, 2005), comic book literacies (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Ávila, 2006), literacy and narrative in digital games (Beavis, Apperley, Bradford, O'Mara, & Walsh, 2009), and the incorporation of multimedia in writing as compositional elements (Bezemer & Kress, 2004; Ranker, 2007).

Similarly, while there is mention of the use of digital technologies for text production in the CCSS, the modified grammars of digital texts (including digital narrative) are not elaborated. Rather, students from Grades 9–10 are required to use "digital tools" for publishing without necessarily reflecting on the semiotic codes that enable these multimodal resources to reshape textual meanings:

> Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically. (W.9–10.6)

There is also mention of the need to use "print and digital sources" in the research strand (W.5.8), and to use a variety of "digital tools to produce and publish writing"—a phrase repeated in the Writing strand from Grade One onwards. Students' digital text production could be strengthened by knowledge of the augmented range of semiotic choices that become available to communicate their message, and by a deepening understanding of how the confluence of different words, still and moving images, sounds or silence, gestures and spatial elements can be used to modify, complement, or disrupt word meanings in narrative (Chan & Unsworth, 2011; Unsworth, 2006). For example, in Web pages, the visual features of the site frequently carry a significant proportion of the functional load of the text meaning. Similarly, authors must attend not only to the choice of written words, but also to the visual rhetorical features, such as the meanings of color choices, the typography or visual features of writing, or the arrangement of visual elements in screen-based narrative.

There is only one mention of visual meanings in the Narrative Writing Standards of the CCSS, and it pertains to visual representations in stand-alone artwork, such as classic paintings:

> Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment (e.g., Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" and Breughel's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" [9–10]).

Here we see images treated as art appreciation, rather than as objects that should be addressed in relation to the other elements of narrative texts. The important role of visual design elements in narrative, such as in picturebooks or drama, is absent from the CCSS. Theorists such as Nodelman (1988) have argued since the 1980s that images in texts should be interpreted differently than stand-alone works of art, since in picturebooks and other media, the meaning is often dependent on the relationship between the images and words (Barton & Unsworth, 2014). These visual elements include the ideational meanings involving the selection of color, line, shape, texture, balance, and spatiality; the interpersonal meanings depicted through framing, vectors, gaze, and proxemics between the subject and viewer; and the textual or compositional meanings that take into account the intersection of visual and other multimodal elements that are combined, contrasted, or contradicted to make meaning (see, for example, Exley & Mills, 2012).

Our research has shown how the process of "transmediation" is fundamental to meaning making (Mills, 2011a; Siegel, 2006). Transmediation involves the translation of content from one sign system to another, such as a child's drawing to depict the linguistic or word meanings they derive from reading a segment of a novel. This cross-channel of communication involves inventing connections and weaving between two or more very different symbolic forms.

In short, the sophisticated design elements of picturebooks and an array of twenty-first century media must be accounted for, not just through the selection of a wide variety of narrative texts, but through both systematic modeling and naming of the multimodal design elements and narrative composition that involves the transformation of meanings from one expression plane to another.

Reading Standards for Literature (Including Narrative)

Reading comprehension of narrative is a multimodal process of meaning making. Neither words nor images alone carry the full meaning in many picturebooks, which often require interpretation of bimodal meanings and a discernment of the extent to which visual and word meanings converge with or diverge from one another (Unsworth, 2014). For example, in a guided reading selection, "I Need That Book" (Gunther, 1996), a short boy called Tiny Tim asks a librarian for a "thick book about stars." The reader is deliberately misled by the words to assume that the young boy is seeking to read thick and sophisticated books . . . until one observes the final picture. Tiny Tim is depicted standing on top of the "thick book of stars" on tiptoes, using the thick book as a step to reach a small joke book on the top shelf. As Painter and Martin (2011) have shown, images and words do not always carry the same meanings, but often have divergent coupling relations between words and images that require negotiation of the gap between two systems of meaning.

The Standards given in the Reading for Literature strand are distinguished from outcomes for reading informational texts, with each forming a separate sub-strand of the curriculum. In the first year of formal schooling, students in Kindergarten are required to read stories and, "with prompting and support," identify the key features of narrative—characters, settings, and events (RL.K.3). The Reading for Literature strand demands increasing sophistication through Years 9 and 10, when students are to "read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 9–10 text complexity band proficiently . . ." (RL.9–10.10). The variety of narrative forms addressed in the Reading for Literature strand is a key emphasis, but again there is little elaboration of the interpretive codes that teachers and children may use to decode the nonlinguistic meanings of narrative texts, such as how images

augment, modify, or transform meanings of words in picturebooks, or how to decode the visual, gestural, spatial, and audio design elements in dramas. There is no attention to decoding the intersemiotic relations between the meanings of words in narrative and their multimodal textual features. Instead, written words in narrative are implicitly regarded in the Standards for Reading for Literature as the sole channel for comprehension.

Some consideration of supporting images is briefly mentioned in relation to Reading Information Texts, but not in relation to reading narrative. For example, Grade 1 students should interpret information presented ". . . visually, orally, or quantitatively (e.g., in charts, graphs, diagrams, time lines, animations, or interactive elements on Web pages)" (RI.4.8). There are no mandates in the Reading for Literature strand for students to attend to the visual design elements of narrative, such as in picturebooks.

Australian Curriculum English: Narrative and Multimodality

The newly released Australian Curriculum English, published by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2014), provides a contrasting policy document where multimodality in narrative is honored. The curriculum is an online "living" resource that has been updated from Version 1.0 to Version 7.0 since 2012. The fluidity of guidelines contrasts the reported lack of transparency and consultation in the formation of the CCSS (see Ravitch, 2014). Curriculum content is not viewed as static, but as continually evolving through dialogue, shaping, and being shaped by contexts of teaching and learning.

A point of difference between the English curriculum in each country is that that the Australian document treats reading, writing, listening, and speaking as interrelated and interdependent.

Three strands organize the Australian Curriculum English: "Language," "Literature," and "Literacy" (ACELA). The Language and Literacy strands aim to engage students with understanding the English language and expanding repertoires of usage, whereas the literature strand aims to engage students in understanding, appreciating, responding to, and creating literature, including multimodal texts (ACARA, p. 5). On the list for each year level are approximately 36 content descriptions of the knowledge and skills that students will learn, but "does not prescribe approaches to teaching" (ACARA, p. 6).

A point of difference between the English curriculum in each country is that that the Australian document treats reading, writing, listening, and speaking as interrelated and interdependent because "the learning of one [mode] often supports and extends learning of the others" (ACARA, p. 6). To acknowledge these interrelationships, the document gives the example that "students will learn new vocabulary through listening and reading and apply their knowledge and understanding in their speaking and writing as well as in their comprehension of both spoken and written texts" (ACARA, p. 6).

The term "narrative" is not always used explicitly in the curriculum, and in places is replaced by terms that are not quite equivalent, such as "literary texts." In particular, the Literature strand aims to "engage students in the study of literary texts of personal, cultural, social, and aesthetic value" (ACARA, p. 8). Within this strand, students "interpret, appreciate, evaluate, and create literary texts such as short stories, novels, poetry, prose, plays, film, and multimodal texts in spoken, print, and digital or online forms" (ACARA, p. 8). Students learn about contexts of production, responding to literature and creating literature.

Content Descriptions and Elaborations in the Australian Curriculum English

Multimodality is important from the beginning of schooling. For example, image–text relations within narrative are explicitly analyzed as students "compare different kinds of images in narrative and information text and discuss how they contribute to the meaning" (ACELA1453). In Year 2, specific mention is made of image–text relations: students "identify visual representations of characters' actions, reactions, speech, and thought processes in

narrative, and consider how these images add to or contradict or multiply the meaning of accompanying words" (ACELA1469). This nuanced knowledge of image–text relations is not to the neglect of reading fluency, as complex narrative texts become a resource for building reading comprehension repertoires. Year 2 students begin to "read less predictable texts with phrasing and fluency by combining contextual, semantic, grammatical, and phonic knowledge using text-processing strategies." This includes metacognitive reading comprehension strategies, such as "monitoring meaning, predicting, rereading, and self-correcting" (ACELA1669).

In Year 4, the language of narrative is extended, both in terms of text structure and grammar, as students "understand how texts vary in complexity and technicality depending on the approach to the topic, the purpose, and the intended audience," as exemplified through "simple narratives" (ACELA1490). Students' knowledge of grammatical features in sentences is enriched through the use of "noun groups and phrases, verb groups and phrases, and prepositional phrases," as seen in narrative (ACELA1493).

From Year 5, students' knowledge of narrative is explicitly extended to "written, digital, and multimedia forms" (ACELA1504). Consistent with current research on image–text relations, students "explain sequences of images in print texts and compare these to the ways hyperlinked digital texts are organized, explaining their effect on viewers' interpretations" (ACELA1511). The Literature strand for this level also emphasizes the multimodal complexity of texts, noting that students "understand, interpret, and experiment with sound devices and imagery, including simile, metaphor, and personification, in narrative, shape poetry, songs, anthems, and odes" (ACELT1611). Students apply "non-verbal conventions in digital and screen texts—in order to experiment with new, creative ways of communicating ideas, experiences, and stories in literary texts" (ACELT1798).

In Year 6, students develop further understandings of multimodality in narrative, evaluating ". . . grammatical structures and visual techniques in sophisticated picture books," such as graphic novels (ACELT1616). This is extended to explicit relations between modes: "identify the relationships between words, sounds, imagery, and language patterns in narratives . . ." (ACELT1617). There is an emphasis on "creating narratives in written, spoken, or multimodal or digital formats for more than one specified audience," which includes application and adaptation of narrative elements and language features (ACELT1618).

By Year 10, Australian students should become more aware of multimodality in relation to audiences and specific media. Specifically, they are required to analyze and explain how "text structures, language features, and visual features of texts and the context in which texts are experienced may influence audience response" (ACELT1641). In relation to reading multimodal and online texts, students learn to "Choose a reading technique and reading path appropriate for the type of text, to retrieve and connect ideas within and between texts" (ACELY1753). When reading and writing narrative and other genres, students learn to "evaluate the impact on audiences of different choices in the representation of still and moving images" (ACELA1572). An example provided in the curriculum is "evaluating the impact of the movement of camera or light in moving images" in filmic media.

The Grammar of Design in the Australian Curriculum English

The above documentation of the Australian Curriculum English highlights a metalanguage for describing the grammatical features of narrative, such as noun groups, verb groups, and prepositional phrases. These are introduced in the early years of schooling to describe the syntax of formal written and spoken language in narrative. In other words, an understanding of genre is progressively developed, beginning with basic narrative "sequence" (Year 1), "text structures" (Year 2), and "stages of various text types" (Years 3, 4, & 5). Complementing this grammatical emphasis is a focus on the cultural and social dimensions of text purpose, in particular "contribution of meaning" (Year 1), "appreciation" (Year 2), "context" (Year 3), "the approach to the topic" (Year 4), "different viewpoints" (Year 5),

"empathy and engagement" (Year 5), and "difference in register" (Year 6).

Consistent with Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) seminal work in Systemic Functional Linguistics, such an approach is deemed necessary to counter the instances when following strict grammatical forms may not achieve the intended purposes, such as in reported speech to show solidarity or intimacy between participants (Exley & Mills, 2012). Although the Australian curriculum overtly identifies the need for image–text relations in Years 1, 2, 5, and 6, and audio–text relations in Years 5 and 6, the curriculum fails to explicate a detailed grammar of visual, audio, or multimodal design.

Conclusion

Similar to the neglect in research and policy regarding the metalanguage of visual elements in narrative, including picturebooks, film, and video games, neither the Common Core State Standards nor the Australian Curriculum English provide a detailed metalanguage for this design work. We acknowledge that because of the intersection of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings, undertaking a metafunctional analysis of multimodal texts is complex. However, as our empirical research has shown, it is not only possible, but also exceedingly productive to do so with students at all levels of the curriculum (see, for example, Exley, 2010; Exley & Cottrell, 2012; Exley & Mills, 2012).

Narrative texts are an essential part of language policy in the twenty-first century, and will continue to be ubiquitous in a growing variety of media and modes, given increased affordances for combining words with other modes in digital sites of display. In this tale of two national English curricula, there is a shared valuing of the narrative genre, but with differing degrees of emphasis on multimodality and grammatical features, including image–text relations. Learners shape narratives and are shaped by narratives, and yet one rarely tells a story using words alone. Multimodality is a key to unlocking the door to a deeper and more evocative exploration of the art of narration, and to realize the Arts in English language arts curricula.

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